

# Something is different now

The church and twenty-first century context

Mike Crudge, 2013.

This paper is Chapter 2 from *"The disconnected church: a critical examination of the communication of the Christian church in New Zealand"* – a thesis for a PhD in Communication Studies through the Auckland University of Technology. A PDF containing all chapters is available online: <http://mikecrudge.com>

Over the next four chapters I will review literature that informs the two research questions presented in chapter 1. In this chapter and the following two, I do this by examining a body of knowledge in the area of the perception and communication of the church in the West. My angle of enquiry is to look at how things are different now for the church from how they have been in the past, mainly by making use of the notion of a paradigm change (Frost & Hirsch, 2003; Kimball, 2003; McLeod, 2007; Murray, 2004a; Trebilcock, 2003). The paradigm change under discussion focuses on the shift of "Christendom" into "post-Christendom". The new paradigm of post-Christendom begins to broadly define the context in which the church finds itself in twenty-first century New Zealand. In the fourth of these literature chapters, in chapter 5, I look more specifically at the history of spirituality and the church in New Zealand.

## 1.1 Post-Christendom as a reference point

Murray (2004b) gives a useful definition of post-Christendom:

Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence. (p. 19)

As I begin my survey of the work of scholars and writers who engage with the concept of post-Christendom and the future of the church, I am conscious that I have tended to draw on the sources from my own local context, the New Zealand Baptist theological college.<sup>1</sup> I realise the debates in the Baptist world are not the only ones I could have engaged with: I might have canvassed the concerns of the Pentecostal, Catholic or Orthodox traditions. Even within the Baptist context in which I have chosen to situate my work, there is a range of influence, from the Anabaptist network (2013) through to post-evangelical thought (Tomlinson, 1995), but the point was never to interrogate different theological arguments, but rather, to investigate the idea that "something is different now" for the church in New Zealand. After due consideration, my decision was to remain within the context that is particularly relevant to my own work, experience, and history.

The scholars and writers I have engaged with have recently written about the Christian church, particularly the current state of the Protestant church or its future. Some of the writers are New Zealanders, and some have produced books that are more "popular" in their format than "academic", but most have drawn on their post-graduate or doctoral research. It is, perhaps, symptomatic of the state of "Christendom" that most of these writers are men, middle aged or older. I raise this issue to highlight a situation in which older men, rather than women or younger male church members, are critiquing, for example, male dominance. Of the scholarship I have reviewed, only one chapter within a

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<sup>1</sup> Carey Baptist College, which has an evangelical expression of Christianity.

book was co-written by a woman and man. While the gender mix is disappointing, it is not surprising, considering the current and historical church context in general. That is to say, men have dominated the church both in positions of authority and also in the explicit thought that produces dogma and material practice. The matter of authorship is a subtle indication that alludes to some of the issues these next chapters will highlight: even though these men are critiquing the church and writing about its future, it is a paradox that they themselves, in this respect, continue the legacy of what they are trying to leave behind.

When I analysed the literature about current opinions of the church from the post-Christendom perspective, it was clear that several key themes emerged. In this chapter, the first theme focuses on the fact that something is different now, and this difference is expressed by using the idea of post-Christendom as a reference point.

Discussions of Christendom and post-Christendom in relation to the church and its future entail consideration of missiology. Missiology is the area of theology that explores the mandate, message, and mission of the Christian church. Missiology is a multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural field of study incorporating, to name a few: theology, anthropology, history, geography, theories and methods of communication, comparative religion, and methodology. Morreau (2001, pp. 780-783) puts it this way: "Inherent in the discipline [of missiology] is the study of the nature of God, the created world, and the Church, as well as the interaction among these three". Examining the church through the lens of basic communication theory has motivated my own research, and one of my aims is that it will add to the greater body of missiological knowledge.

My examination of the literature that supports my contention that "something is different now" canvasses three main groupings of scholarly thought about the milieu in which the Christian church now operates. One group of scholars aligns with the view that there has been a paradigm shift into a new period or "way of being" called post-Christendom (Frost & Hirsch, 2003; Kimball, 2003; McLeod, 2007; Murray, 2004a; Trebilcock, 2003). Within this first view, the scholars I have named do not necessarily argue from an absolute position: Murray (2009), for instance, acknowledges that using the term "Christendom" to cover the diverse cultures and political arrangements in Europe between the fourth and twentieth centuries is problematic and could be seen devoid of historical accuracy and focus, but he nevertheless finds the term meaningful and useful (p. 200). Another view is represented by Sutherland (2000) who feels that the concept of a paradigm shift is altogether too radical. Instead, Sutherland dismisses the notion of "Christendom" as a category to describe a state in society in which Christian faith and assumptions were a given. He says:

Often this phenomenon is sheeted back to Constantine, with the implication that for 1600 years the Western Church has had a clear and relatively easy run. In the twentieth century, it is suggested, this edifice has crumbled and the Church now faces a missionary context of unprecedented difficulty. (Sutherland, 2000, p. 136)

Finally, I have considered the idea of secularism, beginning with Gilbert's (1980) argument that the degree of secularisation that currently prevails is the result of a brief but intense cultural revolution in the 1960s. Each of these views contributes to an overall understanding of the church's external environment.

## 1.2 The problem of paradigm

As the quote above shows, Sutherland (2000) argues against the notion of a total paradigm shift that has so affected western society that Christianity has become irrelevant to the point that it is moribund, maintaining that such views are based on a flawed analysis that ignores history and evidence. He prefers to limit the term “Christendom” to the medieval period in what is now Europe, where secular and spiritual power were fused for around three hundred years. In his opinion, the current discussions about Christendom/post-Christendom are unhelpful and possibly misleading, because culture is too complex to be defined by the kind of narrow definition suggested by a term like “post-Christendom”. The temptation with simplistic analysis, in his opinion, is to provide equally simplistic responses that may discount the lessons that past can teach.

When it comes to philosophical ideas such as “the Enlightenment” and “postmodernity”, Sutherland again discourages the idea of a paradigm change because he feels it is an uncritical use of what he calls a “questionable theory of scientific change” (2000, p. 134). The conceptual framework of the “paradigm shift” model comes from Kuhn (1962), who suggested that science did not progress in a linear accumulation of new knowledge, but underwent periodic revolutions or “paradigm shifts.” By the late 1980s the scientific community had begun to regard Kuhn’s thesis as crude and simplistic (Sutherland, 2000), and Sutherland has adopted this strong critique in relation to the church:

If it is a risky step to apply a questionable theory of scientific change to other disciplines, it is surely a giant leap to adopt it as a means of understanding the emergence and character of whole cultures and sub-cultures. (Sutherland, 2000, p. 134)

His point is to say “paradigm change” is not a sufficient tool for the analysis of cultural change, yet the paradigm concept is used, for example, when people use categories such as “boomers”, “busters”, and “Generation X” to define sub-cultures within wider Western culture. Sutherland, however, claims these terms are unsubstantiated, and constructed with little or no evidence (Sutherland, 2000, p. 135).

I appreciate that there is merit in Sutherland’s view, but I am also seeing that from a practical and experiential point of view there is real utility in using the paradigm change concept as a way of describing that there has been considerable change in society and that something is different now. The paradigm shift that explains the social changes of post-Christendom does not depend heavily on the concept of secularisation, but secularisation is nevertheless an idea that is useful in extending and defining my proposition that “something is different now”.

Gilbert’s (1980) discussion of secularisation in Britain in the latter part of the twentieth century does not use the term “post-Christendom”, but rather, “post-Christian” which is not intended to imply that there is no Christian existence or expression, but rather that Christianity has been marginalised. He describes post-Christian Britain as a place where it is normal to be irreligious, it is conventional to think and act in secular ways, and there is no status or social respectability dependent on the practice or profession of religious faith. In Gilbert’s post-Christian Britain there are still people within society who find Christianity a profound and vital influence in their lives, but these people are situated

outside the mainstream of social life and culture. Gilbert describes these Christians in post-Christian Britain in the following way:

Like the early Christians in a pre-Christian, classical world, they became a 'peculiar people', anomalous in their primary beliefs, assumptions, values and norms, distinctive in important aspects of outlook and behaviour. They become a sub-culture. (1980, p. ix)

More than two decades later, in his book *the Death of Christian Britain*, Brown (2001) describes Gilbert's (1980) "post-Christian Britain" not just as a story of church decline, but as an end of the Christian construct that gave people a means to create their identities. Rather than subscribing to a long-term religious decline, Brown identifies a "short and sharp cultural revolution of the late twentieth century" (2001, p. 2), which started in the 1960s and he does not use the Christendom/post-Christendom paradigm concept, but rather, talks of the secularisation that was part of the 1960s. He contends that it was not the presence of churches or Christians that made Britain Christian, but the way that Christianity infused public culture and was adopted by people in the forming of identity, regardless of whether they were churchgoers or not. The loss of the framework is part of the process of secularisation. Brown locates secularisation "in the changing conditions which allowed previously regarded Christian and social 'sins' to be regarded as acceptable and moral" (p. 8). The phenomenon of secularisation is therefore another way to explain the argument of this chapter: that something is different now.

Taylor (2007) describes the result of secularisation as a society in which where people can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God, and goes on to state that "this [lack of encounter with God] would have been inescapable in earlier centuries in Christendom" (2007, p. 1). He contends that the encounter with God was inevitable because the functioning mode of local government was the parish, and the parish was primarily a community of prayer. Such social changes have now taken place that Christian faith is one human possibility among others, and, as he says (p. 3), "Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives... Secularity in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place".

The scholars who are proponents of the paradigm shift from Christendom to post-Christendom do not rely on secularisation theory to explain the changes that have occurred in Western societies in terms of religion and the church but what they argue sums up a similar outcome for western society: something is different now. The main difference between the discussions of Christendom/post-Christendom and secularisation is that the adherents to the concept of a paradigm shift tend to adopt a more optimistic view of the future of the church existing in what they call post-Christendom times than do the scholars of secularisation.

The scholarship on secularisation offers a different explanation of the changing context in which Christianity finds itself, and it is useful in that it shines a different light on the phenomenon of declining church attendance (Guy, 2011; Ward, 2006) and the sense that Christianity is no longer central to western social organisation. However, for the purposes of this research, finding an irrefutable label for the reasons underpinning social change is less important than being able to place my data against the backdrop of the difference itself.

### 1.3 Exploring the difference

The word “Christendom” is so capacious that it includes the cultural sense of the worldwide community of Christian adherents, as well as the historical or geopolitical sense of countries where Christianity is or has been the dominant religion. As well as this, Christendom could be said to encompass a cultural hegemony, especially evident in the West. I acknowledge the multiplicity of meanings for the term, and in this section wish to focus on the concepts of Christendom being a particular paradigm and attitude.

Christendom is the term used to define the sacred culture that, according to many writers (Frost & Hirsch, 2003; Kimball, 2003; McLeod, 2007; Murray, 2004a; Trebilcock, 2003), dominated European society from sometime in the eleventh century until the end of the twentieth century. The roots of Christendom stem from the fourth century when the Roman Emperor Constantine allowed Christians the freedom to worship publicly. Constantine’s gesture had the effect of undermining all other religions in the empire because of the dominance of his imperial power and control. The early history of Christianity has therefore caused many contemporary Christian writers to consider Christendom as the 1600 years from Constantine into the twentieth century.

Frost and Hirsch (2003) consider Christendom to be the meta-narrative for western civilisation, much in the way Down (2003) sees Christendom representing the Christian religion, and also a geographic area, a state of mind, a theory, and a political polity. During Christendom, the State and the Church were seen as the same body of people, but one involving a kind of dualism in which the State looked after people’s bodies, while the Church looked after their souls. From this point on in this chapter I use the term “Christendom” to refer to the several things I have outlined here: an historical epoch (eleventh to twentieth centuries), a geographical extension/location (Western Europe), and also as an attitudinal framework of influence. This breadth is necessary because of the different connotations Christendom can elicit.<sup>2</sup>

Christianity changed with Constantine. In fact some writers, such as Hirsch (2006), use the term “Constantinianism” when referring to Christendom. Christianity also changed as Christendom gradually declined over the centuries as the State and Church drifted apart. There are various suggestions as to when this drift actually began to occur. Sutherland (2000) argues that the decline attributed to Christendom was over by the time of the Reformation, while McLeod (2007) argues that it was much later into the nineteenth century. The end of the influence of “Constantinianism” meant that not everyone in the state was a Christian adherent. The church, thinking that everyone should be Christian, responded to the evident decline by focusing on attracting citizens to the institution, if not

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<sup>2</sup> Murray (2009, p. 198) offers the following list to define Christendom:

- Christendom was a geographical region in which almost everyone was at least nominally Christian.
- Christendom was a historical era from the early fourth-century conversion of the Emperor Constantine I to the twentieth century.
- Christendom was a civilisation shaped primarily by the story, language, symbols and rhythms of Christianity.
- Christendom was a political arrangement in which Church and state provided mutual, if often uneasy, support and legitimation.
- Christendom was an ideology, a mindset, a way of thinking about God’s activity in the world.

to the faith community.<sup>3</sup> Current day classical churches would call this “outreach”, an activity in which the people within the church will “reach out” to draw outsiders to church membership. Outreach implies that for individuals to find God, they must first be brought into the church, and that somehow, therefore, God resides in the institution of the church.

Christendom also focused on buildings<sup>4</sup>, and the legacy of building programs is visible today when people often refer to buildings as “the church”, rather than the theological meaning being the gathering of Christian people or community<sup>5</sup>. Before Constantine, the Christian community gathered in small groups and often secretly because of the risk of persecution. Constantine removed the risk of being Christian by allowing public Christian worship that emphasised a central focus provided to these gatherings through the ceremony and rituals. Arranged seating became necessary so that as many people as possible could fit the defined spaces within buildings. In other words, Hirsch (2006) says the practice of pews facing the front became normal in Christian worship, and in contrast with the gathering of smaller groups in the early church, introduced into Christian worship a divide between clergy and laity. The clergy became, officially, the people required to present the worship and rituals, and inevitably acquired all of the power this new role presented. This new form of public church, supported fully by the state, therefore invented the role of church professionals and divested power to a “priestly” caste. Before Christendom, church leadership was more organic and egalitarian, as described in the writings of the early church in the New Testament of the Bible, particularly The Book of Acts which describes the formation of the “early church” in the time directly after that of Jesus (Hirsch, 2006).

A characteristic of Christendom was the maintenance of social order and social orthodoxy. A person was “born Christian” rather than the Christian faith being something they chose themselves. By observing certain forms of worship and practices associated with the church, people publically declared their belonging to an institution that was largely about controlling society.

The teaching of Jesus recorded in the New Testament shows that he spoke of the need to share his “Gospel”, defined as a “mission” which was generally perceived as a mixture of lifestyle and doctrine. By contrast, within Christendom the “mission” of the church ended up biased towards the “worship” of God. Christian “worship” is the expression of adoration of God. Worship, whether personal or institutional, includes formal and informal rites as well as an expression of the lifestyle and doctrine defined in the “Gospel.” The worship of God became almost the sole purpose of the church, and

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<sup>3</sup> This is what Israel as a nation in the First Testament of the Bible was called to do in the first place five or six thousand years earlier and repeatedly kept failing to do.

<sup>4</sup> Appendix Q holds a small case study that shows a unique opportunity in Christchurch post-earthquakes that is allowing the church to consider anew, building function and form, and the place of church buildings in post-Christendom New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup> In my own context of living in post-earthquake Christchurch, the church I work with had its 1881 church building destroyed on 22 February 2011 and at the time of writing we have turned it into a bare section of land covered in grass, and this is being used as a park. People in the neighbourhood often say “the church is gone”, when they mean “the church building is gone”. In actual fact, the church, in terms of the theological sense, continues to exist as it did before any earthquakes. As a gathering of people we now meet as a large group on Sundays in the primary school hall 450m away from where our church building used to stand.

inevitably institutionalised God, such that for many<sup>6</sup> Christians, the most significant expression of their faith would have been through their attendance at Mass.

Attendance was also mandated by social norms to conform. The result was, eventually, the expression of Christian heritage and culture seen today in the classical church (Frost, 2006). Frost summarises the effect of Christendom as follows:

The net effect over the entire Christendom epoch was that Christianity moved from being a dynamic, revolutionary, social, and spiritual movement to being a static religious institution with its attendant structures, priesthood, and sacraments. (2006, p. 5)

Christendom therefore represents a time where the governing bodies in society were devoted to the enforcement of Christian values, and the church was organised by these governing influences. Christian clergy held political authority so national politics and the church as an institution were strongly connected.

A discussion using terms containing the modifier “post”, as in the expression “post-Christendom”, seems to beg the question, “Is Christendom over, then?” Christendom still exists, of course, and one item of proof is the on-going emphasis on buildings: there are still new church buildings being erected throughout the country showing the existence of strong church communities. Arguably, however, the strength of the consistent influence the church once had over morals and social practice has diminished. This is not to say that church has no influence at all, and certainly I do not wish to argue that the church does not seek an official voice in national life, for example the dominant church voice in the recent same-sex marriage discussion showed this (Davidson, 2012; MediaWorks TV, 2013), but nevertheless, a shift in Christendom has occurred in twenty-first century New Zealand.

Writing about the Christianity of the 1960s, McLeod (2007) argues that his historical framework shows “the decline of Christendom” (p. 18), and contends that the gradual decline of Christendom is one of the central themes in the history of Western Europe and the USA during the last three centuries. He distinguishes four distinct stages of this decline:

First there was the toleration by the state of a variety of forms of Christianity. Second there was the open publication of anti-Christian ideas. Third was the separation of church and state. The fourth and most complex stage has been the gradual loosening of the ties between church and society. (McLeod, 2007, p. 19)

According to McLeod, the final indicators of Christendom were being experienced in the 1950s when the majority of people living in Western countries were still nominally Christian. He describes what was occurring at this time:

A small but influential section of the population had broken away entirely from Christianity, including many intellectuals, writers, and political radicals. There was a much larger section of the population, including a large part of the working class, whose involvement in the church was

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<sup>6</sup> As the church developed there were differences in emphasis between Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox expressions of worship.

limited to participation in rites of passage. There was the growing tension between the sexual ethics taught by the churches and the messages which had been coming over several decades from literature and films and from the writings of psychologists; there was also a wide, and probably increasing, divergence, between church teaching and what people, including church-goers, were actually doing. (McLeod, 2007, p. 29)

For McLeod, then, the affluence experienced by most western countries in the 1950s created a crisis for Christendom because it created a new economic and social climate whose wide-ranging effects included a trend towards greater individualism which weakened the collective identities that had been central to the process of social freedom in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.

A characteristic of Christendom was powerful ideologically-based subcultures<sup>7</sup> that had been a central feature of life in most Western countries at least since the late nineteenth century, and by the 1950s these seemed both oppressive and redundant. McLeod suggests high wages, full employment, and mass production of what had formerly been luxury items, fuelled the decline at that time. These lifestyle improvements changed people's thinking and behaviour in many different ways, sometimes directly, but very often indirectly.

It could be said that although Christendom no longer defined Western culture in general after the 1960s, Christendom in its multi-layered entirety remains the primary definer of the church's self-understanding (Frost, 2006). Churches functioning in Christendom mode today often presume that the church has retained its status as a powerful and respected social institution, while at the same time being aware of, and desperate about, the parlous state of their attendance numbers and finances (Frost, 2006). For instance, some conservative (often fundamentalist) groups within the church expect their opinions to be noticed and accepted in national policy making. Such assumed influence has been demonstrated recently in New Zealand with public discussion around the introduction of the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Bill in May 2012. There has been a noticeable Christian voice in the media against the support of same-sex marriage (Davidson, 2012), but it turns out that only about 14% of a population sample opposes both same-sex marriage and also claims to be religious or spiritual.<sup>8</sup> According to polls, about 63% of adults are in favour of same-sex marriage, with about 31% against (Colmar Brunton, 2012). The May 2012 ONE News Colmar Brunton poll showed support varies considerably across age ranges: 76% of those aged 18-34 are in favour, 66% of those aged 35-54 are in favour, and 46% aged 55+ are in favour. The voice of opposition coming from some parts of the church appears to be that of a minority, and an increasing minority considering those against same-sex marriage are predominantly from the older age group who were more likely influenced by twentieth century church culture.

These conservative fundamentalist people cry out against so-called "social engineering" unless it is done in line with Christian moral teaching. I personally have no expectation that the government will follow Christian teaching now that Christendom is over, because

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the temperance movement, which in New Zealand was first formed in 1836 under the guidance of the Church Missionary Society (Guy, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Of the 31% who do not support same-sex marriage, 47% of them identified with a religious or spiritual group, meaning just over 14% of the sample were religious or spiritual and did not support same-sex marriage (Colmar Brunton, 2012).



the church no longer defines western culture in the way it did in the past. I do not doubt the potential of the church to positively influence society, but I do believe this will need to happen in ways other than those practiced by the church throughout Christendom. For example, furthering the same-sex marriage illustration above, rather than parts of the church expecting to politically influence social engineering around their belief of Christian marriage, I believe they would have greater influence by quietly demonstrating positive examples of marriage: if their models of marriage are as positive as they claim, this will not go unnoticed. If same-sex marriage ends up being as bad as they claim, this too will not go unnoticed.

With the death of Christendom, the traditional support for what Frost (2006) calls the culturally respectable, mainstream, suburban version of Christianity, or what I call the classical church, has largely eroded. Frost goes on to say that this form of church has ended up with a kind of façade, in which its version of Christianity is predominantly a “Sunday Christian” phenomenon where church attendance has very little effect on the lifestyles, values, or priorities expressed by such Sunday Christians from Monday to Saturday (p. 8).

When Frost (2006) talks of Christendom creating a Christian heritage and culture based around church attendance, he links that to the classical church expectation where many Christians have uncritically bought into the idea that their faith is primarily about attending meetings: Sunday worship meetings, weddings, funerals, prayer meetings, and so on. Even though Christendom is over, many Christians cannot separate the idea of Christianity from weekly church services, a mind-set that a post-Christendom church might wish to change or at least be fully conscious of. On this matter, Murray (2004a) also points out that worship was the highest priority for the Christendom church.

Another idea that informs the changes that have occurred in the church as a social institution is the comparison of the philosophies of modernity and post-modernity. The terms “modernity” and “post-modernity” mean different things to different people and I do not intend to define all of the possible options or theories here. Much of the Christendom/post-Christendom discussion from the writers mentioned in this chapter use the eras of “modernity” and “post-modernity” to defend and support their hypothesis. My definition of modernity for this thesis is the period of time starting around the beginning of the eighteenth century with the inception of Western industrialisation, leading up to the end of the twentieth century (Toulmin, 1990). I will also include the early modern period which can be considered the time from the sixteenth century until industrialisation. A significant determinant in this period was the Enlightenment, particularly the philosophical contributions of Descartes where he articulated the notion that the guarantor of truth is no longer God but man (Briton, 1996). It is impossible to try to extrapolate the period of modernity all the way back to the start of Christendom, and I have not seen anyone try to do so. What I will show below is a stronger connection between the end of Christendom and the beginning of post-modernity, rather than any correlation at the Constantinian end of the Christendom timeframe.

I define “post-modernity” simply as the current period of time where the rigid and uniform restraints of modernity are held loosely, along with any other certainty. I do not personally hold strongly to the concept of post-modernism, but am happy to refer to it as a

theoretical construct to help explain sociological phenomena. In reality I prefer to think that modernity is still the dominant force but it now has significant dimensions of what Bauman (2000) calls “liquidity”. I like the way Bauman refers to this current period of time as “liquid modernity” where he calls modernity “solid” or “heavy” and identifies the changing, transient and flexible dynamics being experienced as “liquid”, so we are in a state of “liquid modernity” (p. 25). As I apply the concept of liquid modernity to the church, I find myself drawn to the idea that Christian-faith-community need not be structured around congregation and a central weekly Sunday meeting, which Ward (2002) describes as “solid church” (p. 17). Ward’s solid church overlaps with what I am calling classical church, where things such as attendance at church services equates to faithfulness, where the size of the congregation is the measure of success, and where church has become like an exclusive club in which organising the club has become an end in itself. Ward’s alternative is what he calls “liquid church”, where church is seen as a series of relationships and communications, something like a network or a web rather than an assembly of people (p. 2). The ideal that the dominant expression of Christian-faith-community could change to become something intertwined organically and holistically into people’s normal lives is something I find inspirational.

On the matter of change in the church over the last hundred years, Hirsch (2006) points out the decline of the church in most Western countries and how this time of decline matches the gradual emergence of what is called post-modernity in the latter part of the twentieth century. Gibbs and Bolger (2005) also tie the decline of Christendom and modernity together, claiming the 1950s as the transition period for both. They assert that this is the time when the church lost its privileged position in society and that the majority of current church practices are cultural accommodations of a society that no longer exists. In this sense the church still considers it has the position in society that it had pre-1950s, giving evidence that the church still considers Christendom exists. The unaccepted change in society by the church is why churches are perceived to be maladapted to contemporary society. Although the particulars of church change differ from country to country, in general I suggest New Zealand is ahead of other countries in terms of how the change has affected the church, largely because its settlement by the British was very recent. I will develop this concept further in chapter 5.

Trebilcock’s (2003) definition of Christendom is “church in the modern era” (p. 17), which alludes to the passing of Christendom if one thinks modernity has passed. He focuses on post-modernity and draws a conclusion about how it works against the contemporaneous church, what I refer to as classical church. He does this with a series of “distrusts” inherent in post-modernity, the first being incredulity toward meta-narratives, causing a distrust of authority. Next he says there is a consensual worldview in post-modernity, causing a distrust of ideology. He suggests post-modernity brings with it a sense of deconstruction, which leads to a distrust of systems. And finally with post-modernity there is a hermeneutic of suspicion that leads to a distrust of motives.

Returning to the idea that Christendom is over, Trebilcock (2003) compares the change needed in this current time with that of the Reformation nearly 500 years ago, suggesting the church needs to evolve once more, this time by using post-modern praxis as the basis of a dialogue with modernity, which will free the church from its oppressive interpretation of the Christian faith. Trebilcock’s view of the Reformation is that the

society of the time was ready for the changes that Luther initiated, but Carson (2005) sees the Reformation as a change caused more by theology than culture. Carson's point is significant when juxtaposed to Trebilcock's argument that the church needs to change in the twenty-first century because of the cultural changes that have resulted in post-Christendom. Carson's effective debunking of the post-Christendom thesis is not without hope for the future of the church, but he does not put his hope in cultural exegesis as do those who favour the modernity/post-modernity connect to what they call the "fall of Christendom".

Both Trebilcock (2003) and Jamieson (2007) list "distrusts" inherent in post-modernity but it is fair to say that Jamieson is more optimistic. As he says:

The nature of society is radically changing. In Western societies like New Zealand, the way of living and doing church as it was in the 1950s has largely gone because somewhere between 1960 and 1980 a 'new world' began to emerge. (Jamieson, 2007, p. 27)

This new world Jamieson talks of is post-modernity and he mentions some key changes that he suggests occurred with post-modernity. The first is a distrust of meta-narratives, where experts and authorities create a crisis of meaning, and this is the same as Trebilcock's first point mentioned earlier. Jamieson goes on to mention a loss of belief in progress that creates a crisis of hopelessness. There is a move away from institutions, which creates a crisis for identity and belonging. There is also a move from a production-driven economy to a consumption-driven economy, creating what Jamieson calls a crisis of debt. Finally, an explosion of communication technology has created a crisis in the relationship of space and time. Jamieson's scholarship delineates society in general, but the same points can be applied to the church. He describes the situation for individuals and church as being increasingly caught up in this "liquid" world and uses a quote from John Maynard Keynes that usefully sums up the predicament that prevails: "The real difficulties lie not in developing new ideas, but in escaping old ones" (p. 32). For me Keynes' quote illustrates well the concept that Christendom is over, but that the church continues under its influence.

Another issue needing consideration in this chapter is the concept of oppression. The formal leadership structure of the church introduced from the time of Constantine resulted in church leaders focusing on maintenance of the institution and pastoral care. Before this time leaders had a focus on the broader "mission" of the church. That initial focus was no longer needed in the Empire as everyone was assumed to be Christian. Church became an oppressive hegemony (Hirsch, 2006). Hirsch suggests the oppressive nature of the church structure had the effect of pushing God out of the church. As he puts it, "in the classical church growth mode it became increasingly harder to find God in the midst of the progressively more machine like apparatus required to 'run a church'" (2006, p. 182).

Jamieson (2007) gives an example of oppression within classical church in the way that church leaders may focus on theological conservatism and ecclesiological control, as a response to the crumbling of the settled period of Christendom. They do this because with the departure of Christendom goes the structures and ways of church and the forms of faith that the Christendom model of church espoused, and so they feel the need to control the Christian faith at all costs in order to defend it. Jamieson describes this as some

“church leaderships . . . circling the wagons against an increasingly chaotic and ever-changing culture” (2007, p. 107). Murray goes as far as defining the Christendom legacy as being oppressive because power has been like a poison that has prevented the church from understanding the gospel, an idea he borrows from Morisy (Murray, 2004a).

Church after Christendom (in the western world) is shrinking. Murray (2004a) points out that nothing anyone has proposed to reverse the decline of church attendance and participation in the post-Christendom era has yet succeeded. He says some people in the church are in denial that Christendom is over, while others defend the current classical church structures and strategies. Others, he says, dissociate themselves from this analysis of Christendom altogether. More churches closed in Britain in the 1990s than opened. During the 1980s and 1990s in the United Kingdom 1.6 million people joined the churches and 2.8 million people left them, which explains why churches are shrinking: fewer people are joining than in the past, but also more people are leaving than in the past. Murray goes on to suggest that the proliferation of church denominations since the late nineteenth century has caused great fragmentation throughout the final decades of Christendom, that has generally been harmful to the church. One solution in the twentieth century was to plant new churches where there had not been any churches before, or at least any of a particular denomination/fragmentation. Church planting was simply a “mother” church reproducing itself by resourcing a “daughter” church somewhere else. Murray comments that “many newly planted churches were simply clones of existing churches, inadequately attuned to a changing cultural context” (p. 69), and therefore not a post-Christendom solution but rather an attempt at maintaining Christendom.

The discussion of Christendom/post-Christendom raises the issue of belonging and exclusion. Trebilcock (2003) maintains that the classical church sees society is a “hostile and distrustful mission field” and that those outside the church need to be brought into the church in order to become like those inside the church. The concept of hostile territory shows the divisions that exist between an ingroup (those people inside the church) and an outgroup (those who, logically enough) are outside the church. In other words, the classical church appears to have a ring-fence drawn around itself, maintaining its membership, but excluding non-members unless they comply with certain conditions and become like insiders. Difficult access for outsiders has both social and theological implications, and is occurring alongside the church’s<sup>9</sup> expressed desire to draw people into its orbit.

One way to account for the difficulty some people have in entering the church and finding acceptance is to consider a concept from intercultural communication, where the term “otherness” (or “othering”) is used to define outsiders, those who do not belong to a particular group (Rozbicki & Ndege, 2012). Othering occurs when outside people are identified as falling outside the normal cultural pattern of the ingroup to whom these cultural patterns and systems are natural and common sense. Rozbicki and Ndege put it this way: “The phenomenon of otherness thus involves two or more parties that do not share the assumptions crucial to functioning within their particular systems of reference” (2012, p. 1). If cross-group functioning is desired, knowledge about the other’s life and society, or culture, is not enough. To successfully function within another group or

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<sup>9</sup> Particularly the evangelical and Pentecostal/charismatic type of churches.

culture, people need shared understanding. My claim, supported by the concept of “otherness”, is that in twenty-first century New Zealand society the church functions as a clearly delineated ingroup, to whom outsiders are “other”, although this view depends on the standpoint of the observer. Certainly, outsiders quite likely lack the knowledge and understanding they need to successfully engage with the church and its practices. The contention of this research is that those inside the church may, equally, lack the knowledge and understanding of post-Christendom society to successfully function outside the church.

Rozbicki and Ndege call someone outside a group the “stranger”, and in terms of understanding suggest that: “For the stranger, this calls for rising above his or her own, hitherto unquestionable way of life and system of reference” (2012, p. 1). While this is equally the case for both sides of my church and society discussion, my interest is in the communication of the church, and I therefore seek to find through fieldwork the existence or extent of ingroup/outgroup behaviour, or otherness in the church. Otherness proposes a kind of xenophobia (Licata & Klein, 2002), so that anyone who is different is treated with suspicion tending towards dislike, or fear and suspicion, which will ultimately lead to dislike. In my opinion, this ought to be of serious consideration for the church. My sense of the classical church is that it is built on otherness: that is, as I have already said, it operates as if a person can only find God within its buildings and operation.

Social identity theory (Sherif, 1966) is helpful in providing a framework for understanding the strength of the ingroups and outgroups associated with the classical church, because it explains how individuals’ behaviour is affected by the nature and importance of membership in certain groups and forms their social identity (Tajfel, 1982a). Social identity is “that *part* of the individual’s self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). The development of social identity involves defining the self-concept according to the salience offered by membership of particular social groups (Spears, 2011). Thus, church membership may be the site at which individuals determine their sense of *self* by “doing church” in familiar and favoured ways. The *self* may fiercely defend itself and the practices of material religion on which it is formed by rejecting the strangers from the hostile territories beyond the borders of the church.

## 1.4 An image of hope

When disagreeing about the use of the concept of paradigm change, as mentioned earlier, Sutherland (2000) is not saying change is not needed, he is saying it is not needed on the basis of categories such as Christendom and post-Christendom. The writers (Frost & Hirsch, 2003; Kimball, 2003; McLeod, 2007; Murray, 2004a; Trebilcock, 2003), who are embracing the paradigm shift idea by describing a new and current time of post-Christendom, do so in order to emphasise the need for widespread change in the church. The term “post-Christendom” does not imply, as Murray (2009) explains, the withdrawal of Christians or the church from the public realm, but rather, suggests that the nature of the church’s involvement in politics, culture, and society needs to be renegotiated in light of changing circumstances. The basis of my research is the need for change, and I base this on evidence I have seen that the church is failing people.

*The Church Faces Death* is an apt title for Jenkins (1999) to use as he approaches the topic of the declining church in Western Europe and the USA. He talks of thanatophobia both afflicting and compelling the consciousness of the contemporary church, bestowing on death a power denied it by the biblical witness:

The church has always, throughout its history, almost routinely faced death: as a human institution, as a group of persons historically conditioned and subject to the vagaries of population fluxuations, attrition, and changes of all sorts, subject to the march of ages and cultural factors beyond the control of the church... But wherever the church has faced death, the church has not faced death as those who have no hope... The church on occasion held life lightly because its life does not lie in its own hands. (p. 27)

He suggests the church continues to be liberated from the power of death so long as it is conscious of the power of resurrection, as the theological notion of the power to raise the people of God in their common life as a community. If what I am identifying in my concern with the current situation of the church in New Zealand, and if what the Christendom/post-Christendom writers are actually identifying are signs of death, then Jenkins gives us reason to be hopeful. He points out that as one form of ecclesial life diminishes and disappears from history, another surprises us by being raised to new life: "Resurrection is always historically unprecedented, indeed impossible, because it is not a possession of history; it is as unforeseeable as death is inevitable" (p. 28). Powerful forms of the church have come and gone including what Jenkins calls "Constantinian Christendom" (p. 28). He makes the current issues of post-Christendom writers seem a possible natural course of events that need not be feared by those who are maintaining what I call classical church. In facing death, the church's attention may focus and its perspective may improve depending on the kind of death and the response of the church. Jenkins calls this process counterintuitive and counter-cultural, and just as humans can believe in strange spiritual phenomena surrounding their own death, so too Jenkins claims spiritual realities around the death and resurrection of the church. Murray (2009) suggests that the end of Christendom might open up a space for the recovery of authentic forms of Christian spirituality, and that post-Christendom might in fact be more Christian than Christendom, not less:

As imperial Christianity in its various guises disintegrates and we reflect on the impact of the Christendom shift on our theology, hermeneutics, ethics, ecclesiology and missiology, what emerges might not only be contextually more appropriate in a changing culture but more authentically Christian, more faithful to our true heritage, and more hopeful. (p. 206)

## 1.5 Conclusion

Most of the writers reviewed in this chapter imply that a paradigm shift needs to be embraced to be church in this post-Christendom context, or as Murray (2004a) calls it a "whole-sale ecclesial restructuring" (p. 75). The majority of Christian churches are resisting this shift and continue to employ familiar tactics, "defending the old paradigm, denying its demise, dithering on the cusp of a new era or delaying their commitment to this new reality" (Murray, 2004a, p. 7). Whether Christendom is merely fading or is completely over and dead, and whether this is grieved or celebrated, things are never going to return as they were. Things are clearly much different now to the way they used to be when the church had a more secure and influential role in Western society.

This chapter and the following two review literature that informs the two research questions presented in chapter 1 by examining a body of knowledge in the area of the perception and communication of the church in the West. My angle of enquiry is to look at how things are different now for the church to how they have been in the past. In this chapter I have made use of the paradigm change idea that there was once a period of time called “Christendom” which has now ended and been replaced by what is currently referred to as “post-Christendom.” I concluded by suggesting that Christendom is an attitude that continues to influence inside the church, specifically expressions of church I refer to as classical church. This begins to broadly define the context in which the church finds itself in twenty-first century New Zealand. In the next chapter I will look at how this literature defines the perception people in the West have of the church in the twenty-first century from both outside and inside perspectives.

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## Other resources by Mike Crudge

- Crudge, M. R. (2013). *The Disconnected Church: A Critical Examination of the Communication of the Christian Church in New Zealand*, PhD thesis: Auckland University of Technology.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10292/5922>

### Other chapters that may be of interest:

- Chapter 3: Perceptions of church: outside and in
- Chapter 4: What might the future of the church look like?
- Chapter 5: Aotearoa New Zealand: context and spirituality
- Chapter 9: Conclusions and discussion
- Chapter 10: The disconnected church

A summary of the research purpose, method and results can be found in:

- Crudge, M., Nelson, F., and Johnson, R. (2016). 'Communication, Church and Society: A Story of Qualitative Enquiry', *Ecclesial Practices* 3(1): 94-119, doi: 10.1163/22144471-00301006

Short blog posts on topics to do with communication, church and society are online here:

<http://mikecrudge.com/archives-communication-church-and-society/>

A year-long Guided Learning option for church leaders focusing on communication, church and society is run through the Carey Centre for Lifelong Learning, starting in February each year:

<http://www.lifelonglearning.nz/registration/communication-church-and-society-mike-crudge>